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ABSTRACT

Data generated from three studies in twenty-two urban secondary schools indicate that the role of the secondary school administrator has been and is undergoing a steady attrition in terms of domain and scope of influence, sources of organizational power, and bases of authority to effectively lead a professionalized organization. One series of investigations dealt with analysis of administrative tasks, one with communication nets and flow of interpersonal influence, and a third with analysis of the authority hierarchy and the relationship of the principal to other authority figures. Since wide variations existing in the role were found to be related to district size, the author suggests as three alternative explanations: (1) the demands and suggestions of the district office personnel, which gave high priority to management matters and required other activities to be handled in an administrative rather than in a supervisory way; (2) principals' preferences by training and experience; and (3) the high degree of stability over time in a school's organizational structure, so that past practices were a significant determinant of the principal's role. The author asserts that the steady attrition of the principal's role and the shift from educational values to educational mechanics show the principal to be threatened from both directions in the hierarchy, that is, by central office staff and by the demands of teacher militancy. (Author/WM)

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AN ESSAY ON ROLE ATTRITION: THREE STUDIES OF THE JOB OF THE PRINCIPAL

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The substance of this paper was developed from an attempt by the author to explain and place in perspective data generated from three types of empirical studies. Each type represents a separate series of investigations; yet, each seemed to point to factors in a broader context. A context that holds particular relevance to an understanding of the changing role of the secondary school administrators and perhaps to the administration of the large, professionalized organization whether educational or not.

One series of investigations dealt with an analysis of administrative tasks, one with communication nets and flow of interpersonal influence, and the third with an analysis of the authority hierarchy and the relationship of the principal--both prescribed and actual--to other authority figures. Data collection in each school setting was treated as a separate case study; however, instruments, interviews, and procedures were kept uniform so that comparisons of data could be made. Although several schools were included in two or more of the investigations, not all schools were subjected to the three treatments.

The schools studied, a total of 22, represented complex organizations. Each was a unit with extended authority relationships, each possessed numerous subdivisions representing extensive specialization of work; each was large, with enrollments exceeding 600 students. All of the schools were located in large cities or in suburbs of large cities. Two schools were Catholic parochial types, the remaining 20 were public.

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This general description is given in order to indicate one basis of the position to be developed in this paper. The findings, summarized in later sections, varied in significant ways from that expected in terms of contemporary descriptions of the principal's role. The variations in administrator roles could not be explained in terms of organizational purposes or parameters of locale, clientele, or processes. This led to a reexamination of organizational theory and the literature of administrative behavior as applied to the principalship. In turn, an appraisal was attempted which may provide a view of forces now operating to alter institutionalized practices within schools--specifically that of the role of the administrator.

The theme of this essay is that the role of the secondary school administrator has been, and is, undergoing a steady attrition in terms of domain and scope of influence, sources of organizational power, and bases of authority to effectively lead a professionalized organization. The development of the theme rests upon the data of the investigations described and upon a view, particular to the authors perhaps, but nonetheless a view, that is drawn from the literature of the field. The analysis offers tentative hypotheses concerning the relationship of the changing role of the principal to the character of large secondary school organization.

The Job of the Secondary School Principal

The literature of school administration contains many similar definitions of the job of the principal. These descriptions focus upon the role of the administrator and not upon the individual occupying the position of head of any specific school. Each secondary school is headed by a principal who is directly responsible for the operation of

the school. He normally is responsible for coordinating and directing the work of the professional staff of teachers and supervisory personnel; professional service personnel such as guidance workers and librarians; nonprofessional personnel such as teacher aides, clerical and maintenance employees; supporting administrative personnel; and the pupils themselves. His areas of concern range from management responsibilities, i.e., approving requisitions, preparing the master schedule of the school, and judging the instances of employee absence for payroll purposes; to in-service training of staff, long-range program planning, and inducting and assigning new staff. These areas of responsibility are normally grouped under the general headings of administrative tasks: instruction and curriculum development, staff personnel and supervision, pupil personnel, school-community relations, organization and structure, and finance and business management.

The execution of tasks, as projected in the literature, assumes a division between administrative and supervisory functions within each category of tasks. The latter refers to the development of sound working relationships, group participation in evaluation and planning in matters requiring specialized knowledge and judgment, investigation and trial of new procedures, and the like. The former refers to the direction of established routines; the processing and legitimation, modification or rejection of recommendations for changes in practice; the development of operational policies to fulfill district-wide policies and directives to the school from the central office and like matters. The supervisory aspect of the role reflects the need to develop a working consensus within the organization concerning the operational specification of goals to be achieved and the means to those goals. The administrative aspect

of the role reflects the need to maintain stable regularized patterns of activity and to move the organization to conform to the expectations of those in legitimate authority to exercise organizational power.

One would expect that goal definition would be of central concern to the principal.¹ The principal would work closely with professional staff, in fact, much more so than with other categories of staff, and that this would be reflected in data relating both to tasks and to communication nets. In an analysis of tasks, curriculum, instruction, staff and student personnel should rank highest in terms of activity and interest. The term "instructional leader" has become the respectable phrase used in describing the role of the principal.² Williams summarizes studies of the practices that describe the successful principal in terms of expectations held by those with whom he works: (1) organizing, managing and coordinating components of the school, (2) improving curriculum and teaching, (3) gaining confidence and support of staff members, (4) winning respect and approval of students, (5) enlisting support and cooperation of the community etc.³

¹ This is advocated in the literature, see: Lawrence Downey, "The Secondary School Principal," in Len and Rudman (Eds.), Preparation Programs for School Administrators, Seventh U.C.E.A. Career Development Seminar, College of Education, Michigan State University, 1963; and Robert Ohm, Organizational Goals: A Systems Approach, paper presented at the National Conference of Professors of Educational Administration annual meeting, Indiana University, August 1966.

² See: The Bulletin of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, "Part I: The Principal's Role," 48:290 (March 1964); Neal Gross and Robert E. Herriott, Staff Leadership in Public Schools, New York: John Wiley, 1965; and James G. Harlow, "Purpose Defining: The Central Function of the School Administrator" in Educational Administration, Hock, et al., (Eds.) Boston: Allyn Bacon, 1965.

³ Stanley W. Williams, Educational Administration in Secondary Schools, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964, p. 42.

The school is always viewed as the "self-contained" unit with latitudes to interpret overall policy and purposes. Again, Williams writes that principals are expected to be leaders of their schools to develop and maintain an effective program in harmony with standards and policies of the school district.⁴ The principal should communicate regularly with central office personnel regarding school operations and work cooperatively with the central office in the evaluation of the school's program, facilities, and personnel.

Procedures and Findings

Each of the three types of investigations represents an assessment of a principal structural feature of organization. An analysis of the findings of each points to a major premise: that variations in the structural characteristics of the organization of the large secondary school are related to variations in the administrator's role. In this section each of the three types of investigations and the principal findings is described.

Interpersonal communications

Standardized procedures have been developed for the identification of communication nets in a complex organization.⁵ The procedure is to have each organization member nominate those individuals with whom he communicates most frequently in his work. Responses are entered in a matrix, and using matrix algebra and established methods of ordering matrices, patterns of interpersonal contacts characteristic of the

⁴Ibid., pp. 55-56.

⁵An early study is: Eugene Jacobson and Stanley Seashore, "Communications Practices," Journal of Social Issues, 7:3:28-40 (1951); more recent studies derived from this approach have been carried out in schools by W. W. Charters, Jr. and by L. E. McCleary.

organization can be identified. Reciprocated nominations provide an index of the accuracy of individuals in naming their regular contacts; these are further verified through interviews and observations. W. W. Charters has found these patterns to be a highly stable feature of organization, persisting in time and turnover in personnel--indicating that positions, even in relatively unstructured organizations such as a school, come to have a communications function ascribed to them that is difficult to alter by the incumbent. McCleary has validated this finding and has made use of this method to study subgroup structure, formal structure, flow of influence and other features.

In the series of investigations reported here communications data were collected in 22 schools. Comparative data were collected in six of the schools over a period of five years. During this time, two principals left and were replaced; considerable turnover of personnel occurred--reaching 42 percent in one school, not including the addition of new positions; and all schools showed increases in enrollment. Although many interesting features of school organization could be given attention, statements are restricted to the communications role of the principal.

An index of accuracy was determined for each staff member by establishing the ratio of each member's nominations to the number of others who nominated him. In this regard, principals were always among the most accurate--the lowest ratio was in the order of five to eight, the highest in the order of 11 to 12. The range of nominations by principals, however, varied from eight to 44, with a median of 16. The distribution was rather clearly divided into three groups: the "lows" nominated eight to ten individuals who reciprocated with no accuracy score being below 74 percent; the "mediums" nominated 11 to 23 with no accuracy

score below 81 percent; and the "highs" nominated from 25 to 44 with no accuracy score below 78 percent.

In Table I, a summary of the data relevant to principals' interpersonal contact structure is given. The principal who nominated 47 others was nominated by 38; 35 of these were reciprocated nominations; this produced an accuracy score of 80 percent. The principal, who nominated eight, was nominated by ten others; but only six were reciprocated. This produced an accuracy score of 75 percent. Size of staff does not seem to be a significant factor in whether or not a principal has frequent and consistent contacts with specific staff members. Also, the number of contacts a principal develops within a staff does not seem to effect the measure of "accuracy."

Table I. Principals' Contact Structure

	No. of principals	Total nominated by principal	Accuracy--percent of nominations reciprocated	Range of staff size*
Lows	7	8 to 10	74 - 100	38 to 144
Mediums	9	11 to 23	81 - 98	36 to 163
Highs	6	25 to 44	78 - 94	49 to 184

*Staff size includes all types of personnel assigned to the school, professional and nonprofessional.

To further clarify the meaning of the reciprocated nomination, it must be pointed out that this means a mutually chosen pair, or dyad. Each dyad can be thought of as possessing characteristics or properties: of content exchanged in communication, frequency of exchange, persistence over time, and certain social-psychological concomitants (openness, hostility, distance, etc.). In these cases, frequency of contact was daily or several times weekly; content related to matters of school

operation; and evidence indicated a high degree of persistence. Concerning this latter characteristic (persistence in time), data were collected in six schools at regular intervals over a five-year period. When the dyads were identified in successive years and compared, no schools showed a greater than 18 percent change and no principals showed a change of more than nine percent--even in the two cases in which principals were replaced. The new principals simply assumed the communications roles of their predecessors. Further, the actual use of these contacts as the channels of communication in the operation of the school was verified through observation and interview procedures.

In addition to the variation in the numbers of interpersonal contacts (which was related directly to the "domain" of principal's influence), considerable variation occurred in terms of those individuals with whom the principal was related (and these data were related directly to the "scope," or number of areas of activity in which the principal was influential). Although too extensive to report here in detail, all principals were identified as being the most influential of the two in more than 70 percent of all dyads. This is not surprising considering the principal's status, access to information, ability to affect rewards and recognition, etc. However, some principals' regular contacts included all those individuals who held positions in the authority hierarchy--department chairmen, directors, assistant principals, etc. Some principals' regular contacts included these types of individuals but only those who showed up as being key communicators in the structure. Of these two groupings of principals very few reciprocated contacts existed to others than professional staff (teachers, supervisors, and other administrators)--contacts to other individuals were of the order of one in

22. A third grouping of principals (three classified as "low" communicators and one as a "medium" communicator) maintained regular contacts outside of the professional staff with only three to six contacts within the professional staff of the school--these contacts did include at least two key communicators and gave the principal access to between 35 and 50 percent of the professional staff through two-step chains.

Authority hierarchy

In describing the authority hierarchy in which the principals worked, references will be made back to the communications data because the communication data encompasses both formal and informal relationships. In this description two arenas are considered--one external to the school unit, one internal to it.

Three distinct types of authority structures appeared as the relationship of the principal to higher authority was examined. First, three of the schools (one a parochial school) was headed by principals who were also the superintendents. This occurred because these high schools were organized as separate and independent districts. In the case of the two public schools, the principal-superintendents were responsible directly to an elected board of education and carried out all the functions of a superintendent as well as those of a principal. These were not the only schools in the group that represented a single school of its type in a school district; three others were lone senior high schools but in unit districts which included 20 or more elementary and junior high schools. These latter three were under the general direction of superintendents of instruction, business and personnel services as well as subject supervisors and other officers).

The second type of secondary school was located in somewhat larger

districts that included those schools located in large cities with 20 or more comparable secondary schools. In the second type of school the relationship of the principal to the superintendent was reasonably direct in the sense that the principal was close to the source of decision making. These principals reported that they were usually consulted on major decisions and that they could readily appeal or alter demands made upon them by going directly to the superintendent or to the responsible assistant superintendent. They did, however, comment about having to maintain unwarranted uniformity in practices. In the large city schools, the third type, principals were far removed from sources of decision making and reported little consultation with central office personnel and little opportunity to appeal decisions or to alter prescribed practices. They did show, within the limited resources available, unusual ability to circumvent prescribed practices and to innovate to meet unique problems.

Internal hierarchical structures in the schools studied were surprisingly uniform on the surface but quite varied in terms of staff provided and the distribution and responsibility for work--as the analysis of tasks reveals. Assistant principals were provided in every school as was a level of subject area supervisors and program directors. A uniform line and staff arrangement, however, is not followed in these large secondary schools. At the assistant principal level, some principals allocate general responsibility for the total school operation and share tasks and responsibilities on a "mutual accommodation" basis; some assign the assistant principal to specific and restricted functions such as discipline, attendance, schedule making, bus routes and hall and cafeteria supervision; some permit the assistant to "take on" major projects of his choosing such as curriculum planning, introduction of new media of

instruction, evaluation projects, and the like in a loosely defined job centering upon program planning, instructional evaluation and improvement, and in-service training of professional personnel.

At the level of supervision of professional personnel each school used department chairmen or subject supervisors always by subject specialization. However, wide variation occurred in terms of time allotted to work with staff, authority to assign and direct staff and to make changes in the instructional program. As size of district increases the supervisory functions tend to be shifted to the central district office and the supervisor and director level of administration are coordinated from the district office. This tends to become a source of conflict and uncertainty with direction and control moved to the central office but with principals held responsible for effectiveness of a given program at the building level. Special programs--athletics and music, adult education, guidance and counseling, student activities, and the like--invariably were the responsibility of a director who was relatively autonomous in planning his program, directing his staff, selecting students, and expanding an allotted budget.

Administrative tasks

The investigation into administrative tasks performed by principals included nine of the 22 schools in which communication data had been collected. Three principals of schools located in large cities were selected; three were selected from districts with more than one other senior high school; and three were selected from districts in which theirs was the only senior high school. In addition, principals were chosen so that a "low," "medium," and "high" communicator was represented in each category. Table II contains information about the numbers of

principals in each category and the distribution of principals selected for the study of administrative tasks.

Table II. Distribution of Principals by Classification of Communication Behavior and Category of School in the Communications Study and the Administrative Tasks Study.

<u>Communications Study</u>				<u>Task Study</u>			
Communication Behavior	No. of High Schools in District			Communication Behavior	No. of High Schools in District		
	1	2-5	20+		1	2-5	20+
Low	2	3	2	Low	1	1	1
Medium	2	4	3	Medium	1	1	1
High	3	2	1	High	1	1	1

The investigators had previously developed and tried the procedure used in this phase of the investigation. Through an interview procedure 52 major tasks were identified. An administrative task was defined as a segment of work some major phase of which was carried out by a principal and which required specified procedures and work flow, involvement of professional staff, assignment of responsibility and administrative direction of the execution of work. An example of such a task was "determination of personnel needs, development of job descriptions, and initiation of staffing procedure." The tasks were identified and grouped into 12 task areas:

1. District-wide policy development and board of education staff work.
2. Business affairs: budget, accounting, purchasing.
3. Community relations and services.
4. Pupil personnel: Guidance, counseling, services.
5. Student activities, including music and sports.
6. Pupil control: discipline, attendance.
7. Building level organization and control, and plant.

8. Auxiliary services: cafeteria, transportation, health and safety.
9. Staff personnel: assignment, working conditions, certification and classification.
10. Staff improvement: evaluation, in-service training, involvement in policy formation.
11. Program evaluation and planning, curriculum development, instruction.
12. Research and development projects, investigation and testing of new techniques, innovation and change.

The 52 specific tasks were written in the abbreviated form and tried out with 12 principals for meaning; the trial group was then asked to sort the statements under the 12 headings above; this was accomplished with 92 percent agreement. Those statements about which two or more principals disagreed were rewritten and retried. An attempt was made to write half of the statements in each category to reflect what is described in the section "The Job" as an administrative and half as a supervisory emphasis.⁶ The statements then became items in the instrument. Each was placed on a card and the nine principals were asked to sort the 52 cards.

Each of the nine principals was asked to sort the cards into four

⁶In theory relating to administrative behavior the terms person and task, consideration and initiating structure, group relations and achievement are used to indicate variation in emphasis given to the way in which the administrator executes the role. An attempt was made here to reflect this concern but to do so in terms of what principals said they actually did rather than how they did them. Whether this is a true distinction is not possible to tell at this point hence the terms used here.

decks: one deck was for cards that described a task that was not indicative of an activity in his district or school, a second deck was for tasks the principal initiated himself, a third deck was for tasks someone else in the school initiated without his first taking action, and a fourth deck was for tasks initiated in the central office or above him in the authority structure. On the cards in deck two and four, the principal was asked to name the initiating person and check spaces indicating: (1) whether any of the work involved in that task was referred to him; and (2) if so, whether he (a) carried out the work himself or (b) delegated it to someone else (and the principal wrote in their name or names.) On the cards in deck three, the principal was asked to check spaces (a) and (b) described above. In districts with one to five high schools (excepting the one district in this group of schools in which the superintendent was also the principal), the superintendent was asked to sort the descriptions of tasks in terms of items initiated in the central office and those initiated by the principal, and responses were compared to those of the principal. Cards bearing descriptions of tasks the principal had sorted as being initiated or delegated to someone within the school were checked out by interview.

It should be noted that these data were collected for other purposes than that for which they are reported here. They became the basis of discussions within the schools to iron out discrepancies, access areas receiving little or no attention, and to clarify procedures and relationships. In reviewing these data, however, it became clear that central office and perhaps other demands were forcing the principal into a purely administrative emphasis (as opposed to a supervisory emphasis as defined in this paper) in his role and to focus upon certain groupings of tasks.

As the discussion with staff and principals proceeded the task areas (refer to the list above) became grouped into four domains of activity for the principal. The listing of the task areas was ordered to indicate the manner in which they seemed to cluster: items one to three described a focus of activity beyond the immediate setting of the school; items four to six described a focus of activity centering upon students; items seven to nine described a focus of activity centering upon management of the school and staffing of work; items ten to twelve described a focus of activity centering upon the educational programs and its development. The number of principals involved was too small to permit sophisticated statistical treatment and the initial arrangement of tasks did not permit the clustering of task areas to become apparent.

Principals tended to concentrate upon one and a major portion of one other, or two clusters to the almost complete exclusion of the other two. This became recognizable when staff began characterizing a principal as a "manager" or as an "outside man." An inspection of results of the card-sort of tasks revealed a high level of agreement within certain clusters and a lack of agreement or an indication of lack of activity altogether in the others. Table III contains the classification of principals by clusters of tasks.

TABLE III. Classification of Principals by Clusters of Tasks

Principals by no. of other high schools in dis- trict and com- munication be- havior ().	Clusters of Tasks							
	Outside task areas 1,2,3		Pupil pers. activities areas 4,5,6		Management areas 7,8,9		Program areas 10,11,12	
	Admin.	Superv.	Admin.	Superv.	Admin.	Superv.	Admin.	Superv.
One school								
Principal A (H)		0	X	-X	X	X	-X	
Principal B (M)		0	X		-X		-X	0
Principal C (L)	X*	X	0	0	-X	-X	-X	
Two-five schools								
Principal D (H)		0			-X		X	X
Principal E (M)		0	-X	-X	X	X	0	0
Principal F (L)		0	X	X	X		0	0
20 or more schools								
Principal G (H)	X	-X			X		-X	0
Principal H (M)		0	-X	-X	X			0
Principal I (L)		0	-X		X	-X		0

* An entry of X indicates more than half of the tasks in that cluster were initiated and/or largely performed by the principal; a -X entry indicates less than half of the tasks in that cluster were initiated and/or largely performed by the principal; an "0" entry indicates no activity on the part of the principal; and a blank space indicates little activity and low agreement about what the principal does. Principal "C" is also the superintendent of his district.

Further, the data relating to the communication nets confirmed in every case that the principal was in direct, regular communication with those individuals within the staff who were concerned with the tasks in his clusters of concentration to a far higher extent, sometimes exclusively, than with other members--even those in the administrative hierarchy. The communication dyads, with their high degree of stability in time, suggest the emphasis upon tasks within the principal's job may be a highly stable feature of organization as well.

Conclusions

Data drawn from these investigations do not support the idea that principals of large secondary schools tend to fulfill the idealized description of the role as conveyed in the literature. Wide variations in the job exist in the dimensions of communications behavior, position in the authority hierarchy, and tasks performed. These differences were not related to the size of district, that is, to the number of other senior high schools in the same district--which appeared, at first, to be indicative of structural differences. Further, there was no reason to assume variation due to differences in characteristics of program, clientele, location or process.

Three possible explanations for variation in the job did suggest themselves. First, and perhaps most apparent were the demands and suggestions of the district office personnel. Even though superintendents expressed the desire for principals to assume program leadership and to work in a supervisory capacity to professional staff, requirements by the district's central office staff, including the superintendent, seemed to give highest priority to management matters and to require that other clusters of activity be handled in, what is termed here, an administrative rather than a supervisory way. In fact, management tasks formed the major portion of the job of the principal.

Second, principals themselves did have preferences by training, experience and interest. Although these were not checked systematically, when the principal indicated supervisory tasks (and high agreement existed that he actually did perform such tasks), interviews revealed significant background and accomplishment. When he could choose he selected activities he could do well and where he was likely to be recognized by other staff

members as already well-qualified.

Third, the communications data confirms the stability over time of relationships in school organization. Past practices, or "tradition" may well be a significant determinate of the principal's role. In systematically partialling out factors of age, sex, training, experience, teaching specialty and the like, teaching specialty was the primary determinate of interpersonal relationships. This fact would support the second condition of principals' preferences, but also it would tend to indicate the basis of the networks of relationships to which the principal must adjust.

At this point, despite the generally held notions to the contrary, one can only assume that the principal's role is not only particularistic in character but also highly specific tending toward the traditional and bureaucratic rather than the charismatic (Weber); toward the formalized rather than flexible (Whyte); toward the structured rather than unstructured (Presthuss); toward the programmed rather than the unprogrammed (Simon); and toward habit rather than problem solving (Bennis).

Final Observation

To return to the theme of the essay, this state of affairs, as far as it is true, can only lead to attrition of the role, which this author believes has been and is likely to continue. The shift from educational values to educational mechanics has already been treated in literature dealing with the historical evaluation of educational administration.⁷

⁷Callahan, Raymond E. Education and the Cult of Efficiency, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962; and Rafael Lewy, The Secondary School Principal in Theory: An Examination of Major Theoretical Trends of the Principalship, Urbana, Illinois: Unpublished doctoral thesis, 1965.

The secondary school principalship was incorporated into the unified educational ladder at the expense of leadership concerned with purposes and the operational requirements to meet them. The principalship has been submerged into the educational bureaucracy.

A central office staff of specialists in various divisions of administration--business manager, curriculum coordinator, personnel director, pupil services director, and the like--have tended to operate in a line rather than staff relationship to the principal. Without comparable staffing within the large secondary school, the principal has reacted to the administrative work to the neglect of supervisory aspects of his job. The question must be asked whether the principal's role is oriented to goals of maintaining the organization or goals of maximizing learning. If the former goals are primary at the level of the principalship can the latter goals exist as the primary ones at the teacher level?

The professionalization of the teacher gives some hope that this might be a possibility. The extent to which teachers do invoke expertise to influence educational decisions, however, is not the point of this argument. But from another quarter, militant teacher activity in the area of collective bargaining is one symptom of teacher interest in shaping their relationship to organizational power. Many of the collective bargaining demands of teachers can only be satisfied by gaining a share of the power held by principals--transfers and in-school assignments, limitations on evaluation, prescribed length and frequency of meetings, elimination of nonprofessional duties, regular and required consultation with the teacher organization committee, and the like. Thus, one can see the steady attrition of the principal's role from both directions of the hierarchy.

If the role of the principal is undergoing attrition, as these investigators assert, it provides a fertile ground for study. Not only is the problem important to the study of administration in education, but it offers possibilities for research to those whose interest lies in testing concepts and propositions drawn from broader concerns with organizational theory. This paper outlines an initial investigation employing approaches of structural analysis to the problem of role description and has provided these investigators with a basis for systematic research in this area of study.

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